A Deep Dive into Helen Keller’s Bible

Nearly a century ago, APH printed a braille Bible for Helen Keller, and one volume remains in our collection. A recent research project on its worn pages has uncovered new insights into how tactile reading leaves its mark over time.

Why Research?

Earlier this spring, Ellen Forget, PhD, a postdoctoral scholar of English and Film Studies at the University of Alberta, visited APH to research materials in the general collection.

Ellen is writing a chapter for the *Routledge Companion to Book Studies* called “Reading Bodies and Tactile Books: How Books and Bodies Interact.” As tactile books wear down through use, Helen Keller’s 1928 braille Bible offered a valuable case study. To support the project, Ellen worked with Jessica Minneci, APH’s Inclusive Content and Programs Specialist for The Dot Experience and an experienced braille reader. Jessica’s observations will inform the chapter, and she will be quoted in it.

About Helen’s Bible

APH’s volume of Helen Keller’s Bible is Volume X, containing the book of Psalms in the King James Version. Published in 1928, it was printed in braille grade one and a half for the American Bible Society and marked with APH in Louisville, Kentucky.

What makes the volume especially notable is its use of braille grade one and a half, a system no longer in use. It included 44 contractions, compared with 189 in modern grade 2 braille. Read this article from Duxbury Systems to learn more about braille grade one and a half.

Jessica’s Findings

Before handling the Bible, Jessica washed her hands and carefully examined the volume in the AFB Helen Keller Archive at APH. “To find where the braille

was faded, I felt each page of Helen’s Bible,” said Jessica. “When most braille books sit on a shelf or are displayed, pages near the binding, pages near the back, and the bottoms of pages can get really worn. I focused my fingers and picked out six pages that I felt were the most worn and transcribed them for Ellen.” Justin Gardner, AFB Helen Keller Archivist, assisted Jessica by taking pictures of the pages for Ellen to reference.

Jessica further explained how her fingers identified the worn pages of the Bible. “Newly embossed braille is crisp, like feeling a pinecone under your fingers,” said Jessica. “When you read braille words multiple times, the sharp pinecone feeling dulls until it’s like touching a grain of rice. The dots are legible, but could be squashed to nothing if not handled with care.” Justin also described the worn braille as looking like a squished marshmallow.

Here is a list of pages that Jessica transcribed:

- Ps. 8:7-9; 9:1-6 (Bible page 2198)
- Ps. 23:6; 24:1-8 2223
- Ps. 77:19-20; 78:1-7 2319
- Ps. 81:1-10 (Bible page 2330)
- Ps. 123:3-4; 124:1-7 2415
- Ps. 136:25-26; 137:1-7 2427

Jessica discovered it was always the start of certain psalms that Helen favored: 9, 24, 78, 81, 124, and 137. The closer the psalm was to the back of the volume and the more Helen read it, the harder it was for Jessica to decipher. Psalm 137 looked the most worn. Justin could see the paper fibers, and Jessica had trouble reading the words the closer she got to the bottom of the page.

“When I read braille, I use my left hand to track the lines down as my right hand moves across them,” said Jessica. “As a result, it was much easier for me to read the verse numbers when they appeared on the left on the leftmost pages rather than when they were written on the right of the rightmost pages.” In addition, as someone used to reading braille grade 2, braille grade one and a half felt like a whole new language to Jessica. She had to be careful transcribing the pages to ensure she got the words written correctly. “It was an honor having my hands on the same words that Helen touched so many years ago,” said Jessica. “It connected us on a spiritual level, and I feel closer to her now more than ever.”

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